



Versant™ English Placement Test

Test Description and Validation Summary

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1. Introduction

The Versant™ English Placement Test, powered by Ordinate technology, is an assessment instrument designed to measure how well a person understands English on everyday topics. The Versant English Placement Test is intended for adults and students over the age of 16 and takes approximately 50 minutes to complete. Because the Versant English Placement Test is delivered automatically by the Versant testing system, the test can be taken at any time, from any location via computer. A human examiner is not required. The computerized scoring allows for immediate, objective, and reliable results that correspond well with traditional measures of spoken and written English performance.

The Versant English Placement Test measures *facility* in spoken and written English. Facility in spoken and written English is how well a person can understand spoken and written English and respond appropriately in speaking and writing on everyday topics, at a native-like pace in intelligible English. Scores from the Versant English Placement Test provide reliable information that can be used for such decisions as placement testing, exit testing, and progress monitoring by academic and government institutions as well as commercial and business organizations.

2. Test Description

2.1 Test Design

The Versant English Placement Test has nine tasks: Read Aloud, Repeats, Sentence Builds, Conversations, Typing, Sentence Completion, Dictation, Passage Reconstruction, and Summary and Opinion. These tasks provide multiple, fully independent measures that underlie facility in spoken and written English, including phonological fluency, sentence construction and comprehension, passive and active vocabulary use, listening skill, pronunciation of rhythmic and segmental units, and appropriateness and accuracy of writing. Because more than one task contributes to each skill score, the use of multiple tasks strengthens score reliability.

The Versant English Placement Test provides numeric scores and performance levels that describe the candidate's facility in spoken and written English. The Versant English Placement Test score report is comprised of an Overall score and four skill scores: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing. The Overall score is an average of the four skill scores. Together, these scores describe the candidate's facility in spoken and written English. As supplemental information, Typing Speed and Typing Accuracy are also reported on the score report.

2.2 Test Administration

The Versant English Placement test is administered via computer and can be delivered in both online and off-line mode. The computer must have an Internet connection and Pearson's Computer Delivered Test (CDT) software. Once the computer has downloaded and installed CDT, the Versant English Placement Test can be taken at any time, from any location. Due to the automated administration, a human examiner is not required. However, depending on the test score use, a

proctor may be necessary to verify the candidate's identity and/or to ensure that the test is taken under exam conditions. To secure the test conditions, the test platform "locks down" the computer to prevent web-browsing, consulting files on the local hard drive, copying or pasting, etc.

Administration of a Versant English Placement Test generally takes about 50 minutes. It is best practice for the administrator to give a test paper to the candidate at least five minutes before starting the test (see Appendix). The test paper contains instructions for each of the nine tasks. The candidate then has the opportunity to read the test paper and ask questions before the test begins. The administrator should answer any procedural or content questions that the candidate may have.

The candidate must use a microphone headset. When the CDT software is launched, the candidate is prompted to enter a unique Test Identification Number (TIN) using the keyboard. The TIN is found on the test paper or using Pearson's website, ScoreKeeper. The candidate is prompted to adjust the volume before beginning the test.

During test administration, an examiner's voice guides the candidate through the test, explains the tasks and gives examples. The candidate listens through a headset and also sees instructions and examples on a screen. Test questions are responded to by speaking into a microphone or typing using the keyboard. When the test is finished, the candidate clicks a button labeled, "End Test". The candidate's responses are sent to a remote server, from where the Versant testing system automatically analyzes them and posts scores to a secure website, usually within minutes of completing the test. Test administrators and score users can view and print out test results from ScoreKeeper, a password-protected section of Pearson's website (www.pearson.com/versant).

The delivery of some of the item prompts is interactive – the system detects when the candidate has finished responding to one item and then presents the next item. For other item prompts, the candidate has a set amount of time to respond to each item. A timer can be seen in the upper right corner of the computer screen. If candidates do not finish a response in the allotted time, their work is saved automatically and the next item begins. If candidates finish before the allotted time has run out, they can click a button labeled "Next" to move on to the next item.

2.3 Test Format

The following subsections provide brief descriptions of the tasks and the abilities required to respond to the items in each of the nine parts of the Versant English Placement Test.

Part A: Read Aloud

In the Read Aloud task, candidates are asked to read two short passages out loud, one at a time. Candidates are given 30 seconds to read each passage. The texts are displayed on the computer screen.

The passages are expository texts that deal with general everyday topics. All passages are relatively simple in structure and vocabulary and range in length from 60 to 70 words. The SMOG Readability Index (<http://www.harrymclaughlin.com/SMOG.htm>) was used to identify and refine the readability

score for each passage. SMOG estimates the number of years of education needed to comprehend a passage. The algorithm factors in the number of polysyllabic words across sentence samples (McLaughlin, 1969). All passages have a readability score between 5 and 7. They can be read easily and fluently by most educated English speakers.

For candidates with little facility in spoken English but with some reading skills, this task provides samples of their pronunciation and oral reading fluency. In addition to information on reading rate, rhythm, and pronunciation, the scoring of the Read Aloud task is informed by miscues. Miscues occur when a reading is different from the words on the page or screen, and provide information about how well candidates can make sense of what they read. For example, hesitations or word substitutions are likely when the decoding process falters or cannot keep up with the current reading speed; word omissions are likely when meaning is impaired or interrupted. More experienced readers draw on the syntax and punctuation of the passage, as well as their knowledge of commonly co-occurring word patterns; they can monitor their rate of articulation and comprehension accordingly. This ability to monitor rate helps ensure that reading is steady as well as rhythmic, with correct stress and intonation that conveys the author's intended meaning. Less experienced readers are less able to comprehend, articulate and monitor simultaneously, resulting in miscues and breaks in the flow of reading. The Read Aloud section appears first in the test because, for some candidates, reading aloud presents a familiar task and is a comfortable introduction to the interactive mode of the test as a whole.

Example:

Australia is a very large country. It is the sixth largest country in the world. It is also a continent and is sometimes called the 'island continent'. It is surrounded by two oceans. Most of Australia is a desert so it is very flat and dry, but it also has rain forests and mountains. It is home to many different kinds of animals.

Part B: Repeats

In this task, candidates are asked to repeat sentences that they hear verbatim. The sentences are presented to the candidate in approximate order of increasing difficulty. Sentences range in length from 3 to 15 words. The audio item prompts are spoken in a conversational manner.

Examples:

1. He's a great teacher.
2. It's not too late to change your mind.
3. People know how easy it is to get lost in thought.

To repeat a sentence longer than about seven syllables, a person must recognize the words as spoken in a continuous stream of speech (Miller & Isard, 1963). Highly proficient speakers of English can generally repeat sentences that contain many more than seven syllables because these speakers are very familiar with English words, phrase structures, and other common syntactic forms. If a person habitually processes five-word phrases as a unit (e.g. "the really big apple tree"), then that person can usually repeat utterances of 15 or 20 words in length. Generally, the ability to repeat material is constrained by the size of the linguistic unit that a person can process in an automatic or nearly automatic fashion. As the sentences increase in length and complexity, the task becomes increasingly

difficult for speakers who are not familiar with English sentence structure.

Because the Repeat items require candidates to organize speech into linguistic units, Repeat items assess the candidate's mastery of phrase and sentence structure. Given that the task requires the candidate to repeat full sentences (as opposed to just words and phrases), it also offers a sample of the candidate's fluency and pronunciation in continuous spoken English.

Part C: Sentence Builds

For the Sentence Builds task, candidates hear three short phrases and are asked to rearrange them to make a sentence. The phrases are presented in a random order (excluding the original word order), and the candidate says a reasonable and grammatical sentence that comprises exactly the three given phrases.

Examples:

- 1. my boss / to London / moved
- 2. of your family / any pictures / do you have
- 3. to their leader / listened carefully / the young men

To correctly complete this task, a candidate must understand the possible meanings of the phrases and know how they might combine with other phrasal material, both with regard to syntax and pragmatics. The length and complexity of the sentence that can be built is constrained by the size of the linguistic unit (e.g., one-word versus a three-word phrase) that a person can hold in verbal working memory. This is important to measure because it reflects the candidate's ability to access and retrieve lexical items and to build phrases and clause structures automatically. The more automatic these processes are, the more the candidate's facility in spoken English. This skill is demonstrably distinct from memory span (see Section 2.5, Test Construct, below).

The Sentence Builds task involves constructing and articulating entire sentences. As such, it is a measure of candidates' mastery of sentences in addition to their pronunciation and fluency.

Part D: Conversations

In the Conversations task, candidates listen to a conversation between two speakers, which typically consists of three short sentences. Immediately after the conversation, an examiner voice asks a comprehension question and candidates answer the question with a word or short phrase.

Example:

Speaker 1: Congratulations on graduating!
Speaker 2: Thanks! It was a lot of work.
Speaker 1: I know. You deserve a party.

Question: Why does the man deserve a party?

This task measures candidates' listening comprehension ability. Conversations are recorded at a conversational pace covering a range of topics. The task requires candidates to follow speaking turns and extract the topic and content from the interaction at a conversational pace. Quick word recognition and decoding and efficient comprehension of meaning are critical in correctly answering the question.

Part E: Typing

In the Typing task, candidates see a passage at the top of the computer screen and have 60 seconds to type the passage exactly as it appears into a box at the bottom of the screen. All passages deal with general everyday topics. The passages are relatively simple in structure and vocabulary and range in length from 90 to 100 words. The SMOG Readability Index was used to identify and refine the readability score for each passage. All passages have a readability score between 7 and 8, which can be easily typed by most educated English speakers with adequate typing skills.

Example:

Many people do not like public speaking. They are afraid to speak in front of a large group of people. There are many ways to get better at public speaking. First, it is good to know the room. You should know where to stand and where to set up your computer. Second, it is important to know the audience. If you greet some people as they arrive, you will feel more comfortable because you will be familiar with them. Lastly, you need to be prepared. You should practice your speech as much as you can and revise it if necessary.

This task has several functions. First, it allows candidates to familiarize themselves with the keyboard. Second, it measures the candidate's typing speed and accuracy. The Versant English Placement Test assumes a basic competence in typing for every candidate. Since it is important to disambiguate candidates' typing skills from their written English proficiency, it is recommended that test administrators review each candidate's typing score. If typing speed is below 12 Words per Minute, and/or accuracy is below 90%, then it is likely that this candidate's written English proficiency was not properly measured due to poor typing skills. The test administrator should take this into account when interpreting test scores.

Part F: Sentence Completion

In this task, candidates read a sentence that has a word missing, and they supply an appropriate word to complete the sentence. Candidates are given 25 seconds for each item. During this time, candidates must read and understand the sentence, retrieve a lexical item to complete the sentence, and type the word in the text box provided. Sentences range in length from 5 to 25 words. Across all items in this task, candidates are exposed to sentences with words missing from various parts of speech (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, adverb) and from different positions in sentences: sentence-initial, sentence-medial, sentence-final.

Examples:

1. Her favorite hobby is _____. She has so many books.
2. He arrives _____ and is often the first one here.
3. I asked a coworker to take over my _____ because I wasn't feeling well.

It is sometimes thought that fill-in-the-gap tasks (also called cloze tasks) are more authentic when longer passages or paragraphs are presented to the candidate, as this enables context-inference strategies. However, research has shown that candidates rarely need to look beyond the immediate sentence in order to infer the correct word to fill the gap (Sigott, 2004). This is the case even when test designers specifically design items to ensure that candidates go beyond sentence-level information (Storey, 1997). Readers commonly rely on sentence-level comprehension strategies partly because the sentence surrounding the gap provides clues about the missing word's part of speech and morphology and partly because sentences are the most common units for transmission of written communication and usually contain sufficient context for meaning.

Above and beyond knowledge of grammar and semantics, the task requires knowledge of word use and collocation as they occur in natural language. For example, in the sentence: "The police set up a road ___ to prevent the robbers from escaping," some grammatical and semantically correct words that might fit include "obstacle", "blockage" or "impediment." However, these would seem inappropriate word choices to a native reader, whose familiarity with word sequences in English would lead them to expect a word such as "block" or "blockade."

In many Sentence Completion items there is more than one possible correct answer choice. However, all items have been piloted with native speakers and learners of English and have been carefully reviewed with reference to content, collocation and syntax. The precise nature of each item and possible answer choices are quantified in the scoring models.

The Sentence Completion task draws on interpretation, inference, lexical selection and morphological encoding, and as such reflects the candidate's mastery of vocabulary in use.

Part G: Dictation

In the Dictation task, candidates hear a sentence and they must type the sentence exactly as they hear it. Candidates have 25 seconds to type each sentence. The sentences are presented in approximate order of increasing difficulty. Sentences range in length from 3 words to 14 words. The items present a range of grammatical and syntactic structures, including imperatives, *wh*-questions, contractions, plurals, possessives, various tenses, and particles. The audio item prompts are spoken with a natural pace and rhythm by various native and non-native speaker voices that are distinct from the examiner voice.

Examples:

1. I'll see you on Thursday.
2. How long can I keep this book?
3. She apologized to all her friends several times.

Dictation requires the candidate to perform time-constrained processing of the meanings of words in sentence context. The task is conceived as a test of expectancy grammar (Oller, 1971). An expectancy grammar is a system that governs the use of a language for someone who has knowledge of that language. Proficient listeners tend to understand and remember the content of a message, and not the exact words used; they retain the message rather than the words that carry the message. Therefore, when writing down what they have heard, candidates need to use their knowledge of the language either to retain the word string in short term memory or to reconstruct the sentence that they have forgotten. Those with good knowledge of English words, phrase structures, and other common syntactic forms can keep their attention focused on meaning, and fill in the words or morphemes that they did not attend to directly in order to reconstruct the text accurately (Buck, 2001, p. 78).

The task is a good test of comprehension, language processing, and writing ability. As the sentences increase in length and complexity, the task becomes increasingly difficult for candidates who are not familiar with English words and sentence structures. Analysis of errors made during dictation reveals that the errors relate not only to interpretation of the acoustic signal and phonemic identification, but also to communicative and productive skills such as syntax and morphology (Oakeshott-Taylor, 1977).

Part H: Passage Reconstruction

Passage Reconstruction is similar to a task known as free-recall, or immediate-recall. Candidates are required to read a text, put it aside, and then write what they can remember from the text. In this task, a short passage is presented for 30 seconds, after which the passage disappears and the candidate has 90 seconds to reconstruct the content of the passage in writing. Passages range in length from 45 to 65 words. The items sample a range of sentence lengths, syntactic variation and complexity. The passages are short stories about common situations involving characters, actions, events, reasons, consequences, or results.

In order to accurately reconstruct a passage, the candidate must read the passage presented, understand the concepts and details, and hold them in short term memory in order to reconstruct the passage. Individual candidates may naturally employ different strategies when performing the task. Reconstruction may be somewhat verbatim in some cases, especially for shorter passages answered by advanced candidates. For longer texts, reconstruction may be accomplished by paraphrasing and drawing on the candidate's own choice of words. Regardless of strategy, the end result is evaluated based on the candidate's ability to reproduce the key points and details of the source passage using grammatical and appropriate writing. The task requires the kinds of skills and core language competencies that are necessary for activities such as responding to requests in writing, replying to emails, recording events or decisions, or summarizing texts.

Example:

Robert went to a nice restaurant for dinner. When the waiter brought the bill, Robert reached for his wallet, but it wasn't in his pocket. He remembered having his wallet when he came into the restaurant. The waiter looked around the floor near his table. He found the wallet under the table.

The Passage Reconstruction task is held to be a purer measure of reading comprehension than, for example, multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, because test questions do not intervene between the reader and the passage. It is thought that when the passage is reconstructed in the candidate's mother tongue then the main ability assessed is reading comprehension, but when the passage is reconstructed in the target language (in this case, English), then it is more an integrated test of both reading and writing (Alderson, 2000, p. 230).

Part I: Summary and Opinion

In this task, candidates are presented with a passage. They are given 18 minutes to read the passage, write a summary of the author's opinion in 25 to 50 words, and give their own opinion on the topic presented in the passage in at least 50 words. The passages contain an opinion on an everyday topic. All passages consist of an introduction, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion. All passages are relatively simple in structure, use vocabulary from the most frequently-occurring 1,200 words in English, and range in length from 275 to 300 words. The SMOG Readability Index was used to identify and refine the readability score for each passage. All passages have a readability score around 10, which are easily understandable by most educated English speakers.

Example:

Some children grow up in a big city while other children grow up in the countryside. Childhood experiences can be very different depending on where a person is raised. Although the countryside can be more peaceful than a big city, it is better for children to grow up in a big city.

Children who grow up in a big city have more opportunities. If a child wants to sing, dance, or play a musical instrument, he or she can easily find different teachers or clubs. A child who is interested in sports has a lot of sports to choose from. In addition, most big cities have excellent museums, zoos, art galleries, and libraries. Therefore, children can spend their evenings, weekends, and summers learning about many different subjects. By experiencing a wide range of activities, children will be able to find out what they like and maybe find a special interest.

Children can develop a world view in a big city. In big cities, there are people from many different backgrounds. It is good for young people to meet people from different cultures. It prepares them for the real world. They can learn ideas or opinions that are different from the ones they are used to. By meeting people from all over the world, a big city helps children to understand how different people communicate. When faced with a problem, a big city child is more likely to consider many different solutions.

Some people do not like big city life, but it has more opportunities and more culture than life in the countryside. Living in a big city is a great way to prepare children for the real world.

In the Summary response, candidates are expected to demonstrate a clear understanding of the author's opinion and to identify the supporting points without including unnecessary details or repeated information. In order to do so, the candidate must read the passage presented, understand the concepts and details, and evaluate the information presented in order to identify the most

important points. Candidates must construct an informative and succinct response with appropriate spelling, punctuation, capitalization, syntax, and grammar. Responses are scored on the quality of the summary and writing conventions.

In the Opinion response, candidates are expected to provide their own opinion on the topic presented and to provide clear and appropriate supporting ideas and/or examples. Candidates must construct an informative response with appropriate spelling, punctuation, capitalization, syntax, and grammar. Responses are scored on the quality of the opinion and writing conventions.

The Summary and Opinion task draws on reading comprehension, interpretation, inference, summarization, syntax, and writing mechanics, and as such reflects the candidate's mastery of reading and writing.

2.4 Number of Items

In the administration of the Versant English Placement Test, the testing system serially presents a total of 81 items in 9 separate tasks to each candidate. Table 1 shows the number of items presented in each task.

Table 1. Number of Items Presented per Task

Task	Presented
A. Read Aloud	2
B. Repeats	16
C. Sentence Builds	10
D. Conversations	12
E. Typing	1
F. Sentence Completion	20
G. Dictation	16
H. Passage Reconstruction	3
I. Summary and Opinion	1
Total	81

2.5 Test Construct

For any language test, it is essential to define the test construct as explicitly as possible (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). The Versant English Placement Test is designed to measure a candidate's *facility in spoken and written English* – that is the ability to understand spoken and written English and respond appropriately in speaking and writing on everyday topics, at a native-like pace in intelligible English.

The first concept embodied in the definition of facility is how well a candidate understands spoken and written English. Both modalities of encoding (listening and reading) are covered in the test. Repeats, Sentence Builds, Conversations, and Dictation expose candidates to spoken English and Read Aloud,

Sentence Completion, Passage Reconstruction, and Summary and Opinion present written English that candidates must read and comprehend within given time limits.

Repeats, Sentence Builds, Conversations, and Dictation require segmenting the acoustic stream into discrete lexical items and receptively processing spoken language forms including morphology, phrase structure and syntax in real-time. Buck (2001) asserts that dictation is not so much an assessment of listening skills, as it is sometimes perceived, but rather an assessment of general language ability, requiring both receptive and productive knowledge. This is because it involves both comprehension and (re)production of accurate language.

Reading requires fluent word recognition and problem-solving comprehension abilities (Carver, 1991). Interestingly, the initial and most simple step in the reading process, word recognition, is what differentiates native readers from even highly proficient second-language readers (Segalowitz et. al., 1991). Native readers have massively over-learned words by encountering them in thousands of contexts, which means that they can access meanings automatically and also anticipate frequently-occurring surrounding words.

Proficient language users consume fewer cognitive resources when processing spoken English or analyzing English text visually, and therefore have capacity available for other higher-level comprehension processes. Comprehension is conceived as parsing sentences, making inferences, resolving ambiguities, and integrating new information with existing knowledge (Gough et. al., 1992). Alderson (2000) suggests that these comprehension skills involve vocabulary, discourse and syntactic knowledge, and are therefore general linguistic skills which may pertain to listening and writing as much as they do to reading (p. 43).

The second concept in the definition of facility in spoken and written English is how well the candidate can respond appropriately in speaking and writing. The speaking tasks in the Versant English Placement Test are designed to assess the many processing elements required to participate in a spoken conversation: a person has to track what is being said, extract meaning as speech continues, and then formulate and produce a relevant and intelligible response. These component processes of listening and speaking are schematized in Figure 1, adapted from Levelt (1989).

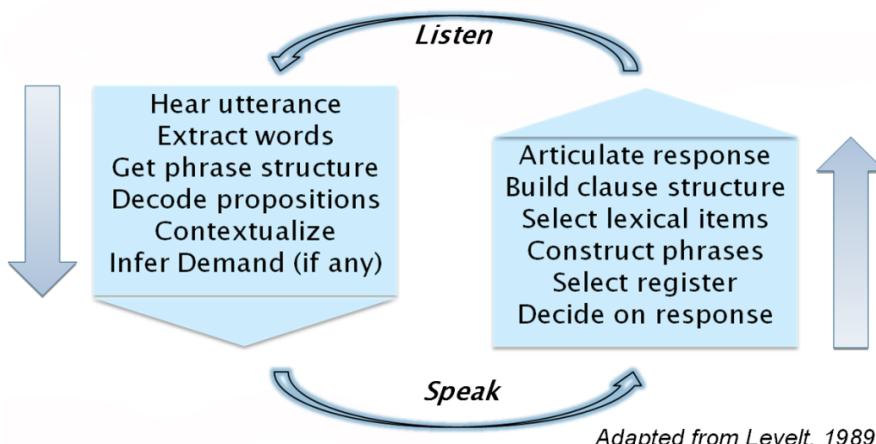


Figure 1. Conversational processing components in listening and speaking

Core language component processes, such as lexical access and syntactic encoding, typically take place at a very rapid pace. During spoken conversation, Van Turennout, Hagoort, and Brown (1998) found that speakers go from building a clause structure to phonetic encoding in about 40 milliseconds. Similarly, the other stages shown in Figure 1 have to be performed within the small period of time available to a speaker involved in interactive spoken communication. A typical window in turn taking is about 500 to 1000 milliseconds (Bull & Aylett, 1998). If language users cannot perform the internal activities presented in Figure 1 in real time, they will not be able to participate as effective listener/speakers. Thus, spoken language facility is essential in successful oral communication.

The composition tasks in the Versant English Placement Test are designed to assess not only proficiency in the core linguistic skills of grammatical and lexical range and accuracy, as described above, but also the other essential elements of good writing such as organization and effective expression of ideas. These are not solely language skills but are more associated with effective writing and critical thinking, and must be learned. Assuming these skills have been mastered in the writer's first language (L1), they may be transferable and applied in the writer's L2, if their core linguistic skills in L2 are sufficiently advanced. Skill in organization may be demonstrated by: presenting information in a logical sequence of ideas; highlighting salient points with discourse markers; signposting when introducing new ideas; giving main ideas before supporting them with details.

The last concept in the definition of facility in spoken and written English is the candidate's ability to perform the requested tasks *at a native-like pace in intelligible English*. The rate at which a candidate can process spoken language, read fluently, and appropriately respond in speaking and writing plays a critical role in whether or not that individual can successfully communicate in real-world situations. A strict time limit imposed on each item ensures that proficient language users are advantaged and allows for discriminating candidates with different levels of automaticity.

Automaticity in language processing is the ability to access and retrieve lexical items, to build phrases and clause structures, and to articulate responses without conscious attention to the linguistic code (Cutler, 2003; Jescheniak, Hahne, & Schriefers, 2003; Levelt, 2001). Automaticity is required for the speaker/listener to be able to focus on what needs to be said rather than to how the language code is structured or analyzed. By measuring basic encoding and decoding of oral language as performed in integrated tasks in real time, the Versant English Placement Test probes the degree of automaticity in language performance.

Some measures of automaticity can be misconstrued as memory tests. Since some Versant English Placement tasks involve repeating long sentences, holding phrases in memory in order to assemble them into reasonable sentences, or holding sentences in memory in order to type them, it may seem that these tasks measure memory instead of language ability, or at least that performance on some tasks may be unduly influenced by general memory performance. Note that every Repeat, Sentence Build, Dictation, and Passage Reconstruction item on the test was presented to a sample of educated native speakers of English and at least 90% of the speakers in that educated native speaker sample responded correctly. If memory, as such, were an important component of performance on these tasks, then the native English speakers should show greater performance variation on these items according to the presumed range of individuals' memory spans.

By utilizing integrated tasks, the Versant English Placement Test taps core linguistic skills and measures the ability to understand and respond to spoken and written English. After initial identification of a word, either as acoustic signal or textual form, candidates who are proficient in the language move on to higher-level prediction and monitoring processes including anticipation. Anticipation enables faster and more accurate decoding of language input, and also underlies a candidate's ability to select appropriate words when producing spoken or written English. The key skill of anticipation is assessed in the Repeats, Sentence Builds, Sentence Completion and Passage Reconstruction tasks of the Versant English Placement Test as candidates are asked to anticipate missing words and reconstruct messages.

The Versant English Placement Test probes the psycholinguistic elements of spoken and written language performance rather than the social, rhetorical, and cognitive elements of communication. All items present content-independent material in English. Context-independent material is used in the test items for three reasons. First, context-independent items exercise and measure the most basic meanings of words, phrases, and clauses on which context-dependent meanings are based (Perry, 2001). Second, when language usage is relatively context-independent, task performance depends *less* on factors such as world knowledge and cognitive style and *more* on the candidate's facility with the language itself. Thus, the test performance relates most closely to language abilities and is not confounded with other candidate characteristics. Third, context-independent tasks maximize response density; that is, within the time allotted for the test, the candidate has more time to demonstrate performance in speaking and writing the language because less time is spent presenting contexts that situate a language sample or set up a task demand.

In summary, there are many processing elements required to participate in spoken and written exchanges of communication: a person has to recognize spoken or written words, understand the message, formulate a relevant response, and then produce an appropriate response at a native-like pace in intelligible English. Accordingly, the constructs that can be observed in the candidate's performances in the Versant English Placement Test are knowledge of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary, comprehension of the information conveyed through the language, knowledge of spoken production, such as pronunciation and stress, and knowledge of writing conventions, such as organization and spelling. Underlying these observable performances are psycholinguistic skills such as *automaticity* and *anticipation*. As candidates operate with spoken and written English and select words for constructing sentences, those who are able to draw on many hours of relevant experience with grammatical sequences of appropriate words will perform at the most efficient speeds.

3. Content Design and Development

3.1 Vocabulary Selection

The vocabulary used in all spoken test items and responses is restricted to forms of the 5,000 most frequently used words in the Switchboard Corpus (Godfrey & Holliman, 1997), a corpus of three million words spoken in spontaneous telephone conversations by over 500 speakers of both sexes from every major dialect of American English. In general, the language structures used in the test reflect those that are common in everyday English. This includes extensive use of pronominal expressions such as "she" or "their friend" and contracted forms such as "won't" and "I'm." The vocabulary used in all written

test items and responses is restricted to forms of the 1,600 most frequently used words in the Longman Corpus Network, a database of 430 million words of spoken and written English, collected from both British and American English sources.

3.2 Item Development

Versant English Placement Test items were drafted by native English-speaking item developers from different regions in the U.S. In general, the language structures used in the test reflect those that are common in everyday spoken and written English. The items were designed to be independent of social nuance and complex cognitive functions.

Draft items were then reviewed internally by a team of test developers, all with advanced degrees in language-related fields, to ensure that they conformed to item specifications and English usage in different English-speaking regions and contained appropriate content. Then, draft items were sent to external linguists for expert review to ensure 1) compliance with the vocabulary specification, and 2) conformity with current English usage in different countries. Reviewers checked that items would be appropriate for candidates trained to standards other than American English.

All items were checked for compliance with the vocabulary specification. Most vocabulary items that were not present in the lexicon were changed to other lexical stems that were in the consolidated word list. Some off-list words were kept and added to a supplementary vocabulary list, as deemed necessary and appropriate. Changes proposed by the different reviewers were then reconciled and the original items were edited accordingly.

For an item to be retained in the test, it had to be understood and responded to appropriately by at least 90% of a reference sample of educated native speakers of English.

3.3 Item Prompt Recording

3.3.1 Voice Distribution

Twenty-four native speakers (10 women and 14 men) representing various speaking styles and regions, such as the U.S. U.K. and Australia, were selected for recording the spoken prompt materials.

Several non-native speakers also recorded some items. Care was taken to ensure that the non-native speakers were at advanced levels in terms of their speaking ability and that their pronunciation was clear and intelligible. The speakers' country of origin included India, Costa Rica, and Korea.

Recordings were made in a professional recording studio in Menlo Park, California. In addition to the item prompt recordings, all the test instructions and listening comprehension questions were also recorded by professional voice talents whose voices were distinct from the item voices.

3.3.2 Recording Review

Multiple independent reviews were performed on all the recordings for quality, clarity, and conformity to natural conversational styles. Any recording in which reviewers noted some type of error was either re-recorded or excluded from insertion in the operational test.

4. Score Reporting

4.1 Scores and Weights

The Versant English Placement Test score report is comprised of an Overall score and four skill scores (Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing).

Overall: The Overall score of the test represents the ability to understand spoken and written English and respond appropriately in speaking and writing on everyday topics, at a native-like pace and in intelligible English. Scores are based on a weighted combination of the four skill scores. Scores are reported in the range from 20 to 70.

Speaking: Speaking reflects the ability to produce English phrases and clauses in complete sentences. The score is based on the ability to produce consonants, vowels, and stress in a native-like manner, use accurate syntactic processing and appropriate usage of words in meaningful sentence structures, as well as use appropriate rhythm, phrasing, and timing.

Listening: Listening reflects the ability to understand specific details and main ideas from everyday English speech. The score is based on the ability to track meaning and infer the message from English that is spoken at a conversational pace.

Reading: Reading reflects the ability to understand written English texts on everyday topics. The score is based on the ability to operate at functional speeds to extract meaning, infer the message, and respond appropriately.

Writing: Writing reflects the ability to produce written English texts on everyday topics. The score is based on the ability to present ideas and information in a clear and logical sequence, use a wide range of appropriate words as well as a variety of sentence structures.

Of the 81 items in an administration of the Versant English Placement Test, 75 responses are currently used in the automatic scoring. The first item response in Parts B, C, D, F, and G are considered a practice item and is not incorporated into the final score. Figure 3 illustrates which tasks of the test contribute to each of the four skill scores. Each vertical rectangle represents a response from a candidate. The items that are not included in the automatic scoring are shown in blue.

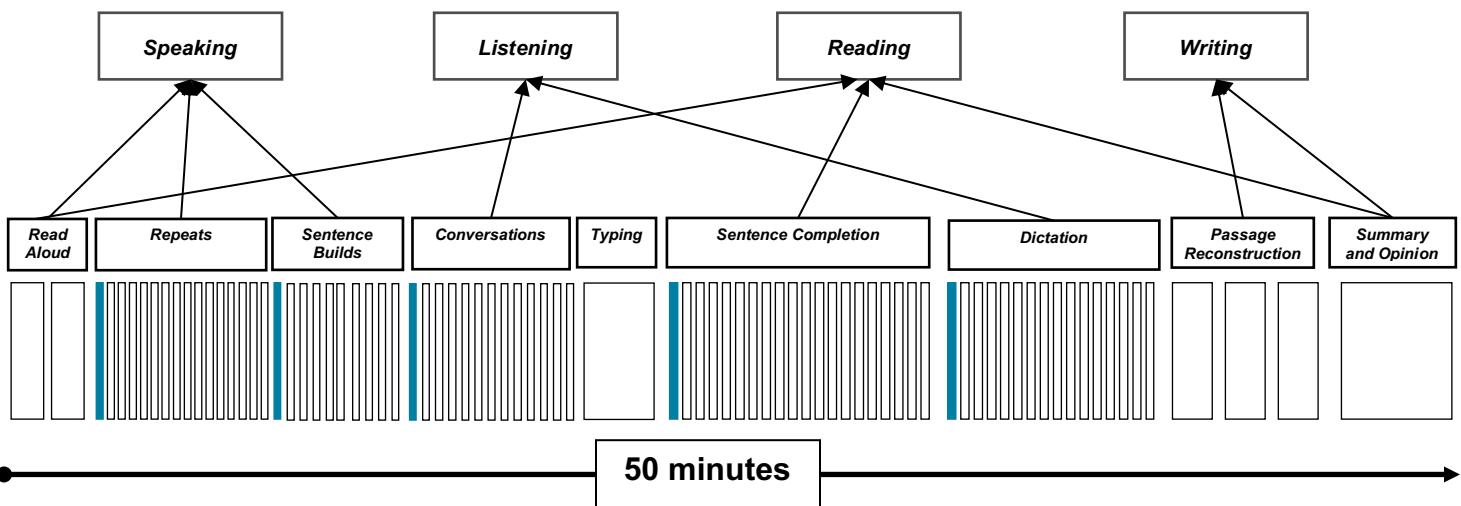


Figure 2. Relation of Skill Scores to Tasks

Table 3 shows how the four skill scores are weighted to achieve an Overall score.

Table 3. Skill Score Weighting in Relation to Versant English Placement Overall score

Skill Score	Weighting
Speaking	25%
Listening	25%
Reading	25%
Writing	25%
Overall Score	100%

In the Versant English Placement Test scoring logic, the four skill scores are weighted equally because successful communication depends on all four skills. Producing accurate spoken and written content is important, but poor listening or reading comprehension skills can lead to inappropriate responses; in the same way, accurate listening and reading comprehension skills but the inability to articulate or write an appropriate response can also hinder communication.

Each incoming spoken response from a Versant English Placement Test is recognized automatically by a speech recognizer that has been optimized for non-native speech. The words, pauses, syllables, phones, and even some subphonemic events are located in the recorded signal. The content of the responses to Read Aloud, Repeats, Sentence Builds, and Conversations is scored according to the presence or absence of expected correct words in correct sequences. The manner of the response (fluency and pronunciation) is calculated by measuring the latency of the response, the rate of speaking, the position and length of pauses, the stress and segmental forms of the words, and the pronunciation of the segments in the words within their lexical and phrasal context. These measures are scaled according to the native and non-native distributions and then re-scaled and combined so that they optimally predict human judgments on manner-of-speaking.

Each incoming written response from a Versant English Placement Test is recognized automatically by the Versant testing system that has been optimized for non-native writing. The content of the responses to Sentence Completion and Dictation are scored according to the presence or absence of expected correct words in correct sequences. The content of responses to Passage Reconstruction and Summary and Opinion items are scored for content by scaling the weighted sum of the occurrence of a large set of expected words and word sequences in the written response. Weights are assigned to the expected words and word sequences according to their semantic relation to the prompt using a variation of latent semantic analysis (Landauer et al., 1998). These responses are also scored for grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and syntax.

4.2 Score Use

Once a candidate has completed a test, the Versant testing system analyzes the performances and posts the scores at www.pearson.com/versant. Test administrators and score users can then view and print out the test results from a password-protected section of the website.

Score users may be educational and government institutions as well as commercial and business organizations. Pearson endorses the use of Versant test scores for making decisions about the English skills of individuals, provided score users have reliable evidence confirming the identity of the individuals at the time of test administration. Score users may obtain such evidence either by administering the Versant English Placement test themselves under secure conditions or by having trusted third parties administer the test. In several countries, education and commercial institutions provide such services.

Versant English Placement test scores can be used to assess how well and efficiently a candidate can process and produce spoken and written English on everyday topics. Scores may also be used effectively in evaluating whether an individual's level of spoken and written English is sufficient to perform certain tasks or functions requiring mastery of spoken and written English.

The Versant English Placement test score scale covers a wide range of abilities in spoken and written English communication. Score users must decide what Versant English Placement test score can be regarded as a minimum requirement in their context. Score users may wish to base their selection of an appropriate criterion score on their own localized research. Pearson can provide further assistance in establishing criterion scores.

5. Validation

The scoring models used in the Versant English Placement Test were trained on a norming data set comprised of 72 native and 506 non-native English speaking test-takers. Test-takers came from a wide variety of different countries, including Indonesia, Singapore, China, Japan, Korea, and India.

5.1 Validity Study Design

A series of validity analyses were conducted to examine four aspects of the Versant English Placement Test scores:

Internal Validity

1. Reliability: whether or not the Versant English Placement Test is reliable and internally consistent,
2. Dimensionality: whether or not the four different skill scores of the Versant English Placement Test are sufficiently distinct,
3. Accuracy: whether or not the automatically scored Versant English Placement Test scores are comparable to the scores that human listeners and raters would assign,

Concurrent Validity

4. Relation to framework with related construct: how do Versant English Placement Test scores correspond to the six levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

5.1.1 Validation Sample

A total of 214 participants were recruited for a series of validation analyses. These validation participants were recruited separately from the field test candidates. Care was taken to ensure that the training dataset and validation dataset did not overlap for independent validation analyses. This means that the performance samples provided by the validation candidates were excluded from the datasets used for training the automatic speech processing models or for training the scoring models.

Validation participants were recruited from a variety of countries, first language backgrounds, and proficiency levels and were representative of the candidate population using the Versant English Placement Test. A total of five native speakers were included in the validation dataset. Table 4 below summarizes the demographic information of the validation participants.

Table 4. Description of Participants in the Validation Sample (n=214).

Number of Participants	214 (including 5 native speakers)
Male : Female ratio	50% : 50%
Age Range	16 - 64 mean = 26 6 unreported
Languages	Arabic, Bahasa, Burmese, Cantonese, Czech, English, Farsi, Filipino, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Swahili, Korean, Malay, Mandarin, Mongolian, Pashto, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Serbian, Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese

5.2 Internal Validity

5.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

The mean Overall score of the validation sample was 46.36 with a standard deviation of 13.72 (on a scale of 20-70). Table 5 summarizes some descriptive statistics for the validation sample.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for the Validation Dataset (n=214).

Measure	Statistic
Mean	46.36
Standard Error	0.94
Median	46.29
Standard Deviation	13.72
Sample Variance	188.13
Kurtosis	-0.93
Skewness	-0.08

5.2.2 Test Reliability

To understand the consistency and accuracy of the Versant English Placement Test scores and the distinctness of the subscores, the following were examined: the standard error of measurement of the Versant English Placement Test Overall score; the reliability of the Versant English Placement Test (split-half reliability); the correlations between the Versant English Placement Test Overall score and its subscores, and between pairs of subscores; comparison of machine-generated Versant English Placement Test scores with listener-judged scores of the same Versant English Placement tests. These qualities of consistency and accuracy of the test scores are the foundation of any valid test.

The Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) provides an estimate of the amount of error, due to unreliability, in an individual's observed test score and "shows how far it is worth taking the reported score at face value" (Luoma, 2003: 183). The SEM of the Versant English Placement Overall score is 1.3.

Score reliabilities were estimated by the split-half method. Split-half reliability was calculated for the Overall score and all subscores. The split-half reliabilities use the Spearman-Brown Prophecy Formula to correct for underestimation. The reliability coefficients are summarized in Table 6. Table 6 also summarizes the inter-rater reliability coefficients from human scoring. The human scores were calculated from human transcriptions and human judgments. Table 6 compares the same individual performances, scored by careful human rating in one case and by independent automatic machine scoring in the other case. The values in Table 6 suggest that there is sufficient information in a Versant English Placement Test item response set to extract reliable information, and that the effect on reliability of using the Ordinate speech recognition technology, as opposed to careful human rating, is quite small. The high reliability score is a good indication that the computerized assessment will be consistent for the same candidate assuming there are no changes in the candidate's language proficiency level.

Table 6. Split-half Reliabilities of Versant English Placement Test Machine Scores versus Inter-rater Reliability from Human Scoring (n=214).

Score	Split-half Reliability for Machine Scores	Inter-rater Reliability
Overall	0.99	0.99
Speaking	0.94	0.95
Listening	0.95	0.97
Reading	0.95	0.97
Writing	0.99	0.98

5.2.3 Dimensionality: Correlations Among Skill Scores

Each skill score on a test ideally provides unique information about a specific dimension of the candidate's ability. For language tests, the expectation is that there will be a certain level of covariance between skill scores given the nature of language learning. When language learning takes place, the candidate's skills tend to improve across multiple dimensions. However, if all the skill scores were to correlate perfectly with one another, then the skill scores might not be measuring different aspects of facility with the language.

Table 7 presents the correlations among the Versant English Placement Test skill scores and the Overall score for the same validation sample of 214 candidates, which includes five native English speakers.

Table 7. Inter-correlation between skill scores on the Versant English Placement Test (n=214).

	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
Speaking	-	0.83	0.77	0.70	0.90
Listening		-	0.85	0.80	0.94
Reading			-	0.85	0.94
Writing				-	0.91

As expected, test scores correlate with each other to some extent by virtue of presumed general covariance within the candidate population between different component elements of language skills. However, the correlations between the skill scores are significantly below unity, which indicates that the different scores measure different aspects of the test construct.

5.2.4 Machine Accuracy

Another analysis for internal quality involved comparing scores from the Versant English Placement Test, which uses Ordinate's speech processing technologies, versus careful human transcriptions and human judgments from expert raters.

Table 8 presents Pearson Product-Moment correlations between machine scores and human scores, when both methods are applied to the same performances on the same Versant English Placement Test responses. The candidate sample is the same set of 214 validation candidates that was used in the reliability and skill score analyses. Correlations presented in Table 8 suggest that scoring a Versant English Placement Test by machine will yield scores that generally correspond as they should with human ratings. Among the skill scores, the human-machine relation is closer for the active skill scores (Speaking and Writing) than for the passive skill scores (Listening and Reading), but the relation is close for all four skill scores. At the Overall score level, Versant English Placement Test machine-generated scores are virtually indistinguishable from scoring that is done by careful human transcriptions and multiple independent human judgments.

Table 8. Correlations between Human and Machine Scoring of Versant English Placement Test Responses (n = 214).

Score Type	Correlation
Overall	0.98
Speaking	0.91
Listening	0.98
Reading	0.98
Writing	0.90

5.3 Concurrent Validity

Because the Versant English Placement Test shares many tasks with the Versant Pro – Speaking test and the Versant Pro – Writing test, the results from previous studies mapping Versant Pro – Speaking and Writing scores onto the CEFR levels have been applied to the Versant English Placement Test. That is, the established Versant Pro score ranges aligned with the CEFR levels have been used for the Versant English Placement Test, as shown in Table 11. (Notes that the Versant English Placement Test assesses only up to CEFR level C1).

Table 9. Mapping of CEFR Levels with Versant English Placement Test Scores

Versant English Placement Test 20 – 70	CEFR A1 – C1
20-23	<A1
23-32	A1
33-45	A2
46-55	B1
56-67	B2
68-70	C1

6. Conclusions

Data from the validation studies provide evidence in support of the following conclusions:

- The Versant English Placement Test produces precise and reliable skill estimates.
- Skill scores of the Versant English Placement Test are reasonably distinct and therefore offer useful diagnostics.
- Versant English Placement Test scores show a high correlation with human-produced ratings.
- Versant English Placement Test Overall scores correspond to the CEFR levels.

To assure the defensibility of employee selection procedures, employers in the U.S. follow the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC's) Uniform Guidelines for Employee Selection Procedures. These guidelines state that employee selection procedures must be reliable and valid. The above information provides evidence of the reliability, validity and legal defensibility of the Versant English Placement Test in conformance with the prescriptions of the EEOC's Uniform Guidelines.

7. About the Company

Pearson: Pearson's Knowledge Technologies group and Ordinate Corporation, the creator of the Versant tests, were combined in January, 2008. The Versant tests are the first to leverage a completely automated method for assessing spoken and written language.

Ordinate Testing Technology: The Versant automated testing system was developed to apply advanced speech recognition techniques and data collection to the evaluation of language skills. The system includes automatic telephone and computer reply procedures, dedicated speech recognizers, speech analyzers, databanks for digital storage of speech samples, and score report generators linked to the Internet. The Versant English Placement Test is the result of years of research in speech recognition, statistical modeling, linguistics, and testing theory. The Versant patented technologies are applied to its own language tests such as the Versant series and also to customized tests. Sample projects include assessment of spoken English, children's reading assessment, adult literacy assessment, and collections and human rating of spoken language samples.

Pearson's Policy: Pearson is committed to the best practices in the development, use, and administration of language tests. Each Pearson employee strives to achieve the highest standards in test publishing and test practice. As applicable, Pearson follows the guidelines propounded in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, and the Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement. A copy of the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing is available to every employee for reference.

Research at Pearson: In close cooperation with international experts, Pearson conducts ongoing research aimed at gathering substantial evidence for the validity, reliability, and practicality of its current products and investigating new applications for Ordinate technology. Research results are published in international journals and made available through the Versant website.

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9. Appendix: Test Paper

Individualized test form (unique for each candidate) showing Test Identification Number and instructions for all nine tasks.

VERSANT ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST		
<i>The Versant English Placement Test has 9 parts and can be taken on a computer in approximately 50 minutes. To start the test, enter your Test Identification Number in the box on your computer screen. Then, complete the audio volume check and microphone check. When the test starts, respond to the test questions.</i>		Test Identification Number (TIN) 9464 8551 <small>Expires: July 20, 2012</small>
PART	TASK	TEST DETAILS
A	Read Aloud	<i>Read the passage aloud smoothly and naturally in a clear voice. You will be stopped after 30 seconds. This is not a speed reading test. You may not be able to finish reading the entire passage, but that is okay. When your time is up, you will automatically move on to the next item.</i>
B	Repeat	<i>Please repeat each sentence that you hear.</i> Example: You hear: "Leave town on the next train." You say: "Leave town on the next train."
C	Sentence Builds	<i>Please rearrange the word groups into a sentence.</i> Example: You hear: "was reading" ... "my mother" ... "her favorite magazine" You say: "My mother was reading her favorite magazine."
D	Conversations	<i>You will hear a conversation between two people, followed by a question. Give a short, simple answer to the question.</i> Example: You hear: Speaker 1: "Lucy, can you come to the office early tomorrow?" Speaker 2: "Sure, what time?" Speaker 1: "7:30 would be great." Question: "What will Lucy have to do tomorrow morning?" You say: "Go to the office early." or "She will go to the office at 7:30."
E	Typing	<i>This section allows you to get used to the keyboard and also measures your typing speed. You will have 60 seconds to type as much as you can. Type quickly and accurately. Keep typing until your time is up. Your work will be saved automatically.</i>
F	Sentence Completion	<i>Please type one word that best fits the meaning of the sentence. Type only one word. You will have 25 seconds for each sentence. Click "Next" when you are finished.</i>
G	Dictation	<i>Please type each sentence exactly as you hear it. You will have 25 seconds for each sentence. Pay attention to spelling and punctuation. Click "Next" when you are finished. After 25 seconds, your work will be saved automatically.</i>
H	Passage Reconstruction	<i>You will have 30 seconds to read a paragraph. After 30 seconds, the paragraph will disappear from the screen. Then, you will have 90 seconds to reconstruct the paragraph. Show that you understood the passage by rewriting it in your own words. Your answer will be scored for clear and accurate content, not word-for-word memorization. After 90 seconds, your work will be saved automatically.</i>
I	Summary and Opinion	<i>Read the passage. Then, in the first box, write a short summary of the author's opinion in 25-50 words. In the second box, write your opinion on the topic. Do you agree or disagree with the author? Why? Try to use your own ideas. You must write at least 50 words. You will have 18 minutes to read the passage and write both the summary and opinion. Write both the summary and the opinion before clicking 'Next'. Write in complete sentences. After 18 minutes, your work will be saved automatically.</i>

Thank you for completing the test. 0 - 59719 - 1
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PEARSON

About Us

Pearson creates unique technology for automated assessment of speech and text used in a variety of industry leading products and services. These include the Versant line of automated spoken language tests built on Ordinate technology, and WriteToLearn™ automated written summary and essay evaluations using the Knowledge Analysis Technologies™ (KAT) engine.

**To try a sample test or get more information,
visit us online at:**

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